



Harvard's Invisible Faculty: Four Portraits

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Jane Knowles

A poster from 1922 shows a Radcliffe student in academic robes passing through the gate of opportunity to serve the world. But this was not an “equal opportunity” gate, and women did not pass through it to take up teaching and research posts at universities such as Harvard. Three academic women who managed to enter a side door served as invisible faculty at Harvard. They were marginal figures, did not appear in catalogues, and have received little recognition in the histories of Harvard. The first is Susanne Knauth Langer, philosopher, Radcliffe A.B. 1920, Ph.D. 1926. She was appointed tutor at Radcliffe in Philosophy in 1927. For men a tutorship was the lowest rung in the ladder to tenure; for women it was often a lifetime position. Langer stayed in that post until 1942, without tenure, research leave, or interaction with Harvard colleagues. Her work was largely ignored by Harvard, but she was not discouraged. She wrote three important books, including the best-selling *Philosophy in a New Key*, published by the Harvard University Press in 1942. Translated into 20 languages, it became one of the most influential books in the field of aesthetics. Her reputation blossomed. After her marriage to historian William Langer ended in divorce, she left Harvard to become professor and chair of the Philosophy Department at Connecticut College.

Mary Peters Fieser, a chemist, was able to sidestep the barriers to an academic position through her marriage to Louis Fieser in 1932. She met her future husband at Bryn Mawr, where she was a chemistry major and he a lecturer in chemistry. He came to

Harvard to teach and she followed to Radcliffe to do a master's degree in 1931, but she found a chilly climate for women in chemistry and decided to marry rather than to pursue a Ph.D. "I could see I was not going to get along well on my own. Louis wanted to get married and it seemed like a nice opportunity. . . . I liked the man. I could do as much chemistry as I wanted, and it didn't matter what the other professors thought of me." Mary was ultimately appointed a research associate, but she could not apply for research grants in her own name, was not eligible for tenure, and her contributions were overshadowed by, and her status dependent on, her husband. Nevertheless, she had a "creative and enterprising career." She was a gifted experimentalist and an influential part of the research group. "One day," she recalled, "when I came into the lab, Louis had cleared everything away from my bench so that I wouldn't be tempted to do more experimental work."¹ He had decided that she should concentrate on writing. She worked loyally on their joint projects, coauthored two textbooks, and for nearly 30 years edited a reference series that is still the bible for chemists. Her bright red Corvette convertible was a symbol of independence and a gesture of defiance.

[See Image 8: Susanne Knauth Langer]

Some women were faculty in everything but name. A photograph from the 1920s shows a group of extraordinary women astrophysicists at the Harvard College Observatory.² Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin, an Englishwoman from the other Cambridge, who was a member of the Observatory staff from 1926 to 1966, faced every kind of obstacle: She wrote a brilliant Ph.D. thesis (the first in astronomy). She lectured in the

Astronomy Department but was not listed in Harvard and Radcliffe catalogues. She directed graduate research without status, had no research leaves, and was paid less after seven years than a beginning male lecturer. Her salary was listed under “equipment.” Indeed, president A. Lawrence Lowell said that “Miss Payne should never have a position in the University while he was alive.” Nevertheless, she was able to survive and flourish. “It was a case,” she said, “not of survival of the fittest, but of the most doggedly persistent.” In 1938, under a new president, James Bryant Conant, she was appointed Phillips Astronomer, became professor in 1956, and eventually chair of the department. She was never bitter about her Harvard experience: “[We] could meet on equal terms with any astronomer in the world. Everyone who was anybody ... came through and argued, and fraternized. Those were glorious days ... We met as equals; nobody condescended to me on account of sex or youth ... We were scientists, we were scholars ([and] neither of these words has a gender)”.³

[See Image 9: Mary peters Fieser]

In 1948 Helen Maud Cam, a medieval historian and fellow of Girton College, became the first woman to receive tenure at Harvard. Under the leadership of Radcliffe College and the creative philanthropy of the Zemurray family, a chair was created for distinguished women in any field at Harvard, and Cam became its first incumbent. This unbarred the gates. Cam called herself the first swallow of summer, and prophesied that soon a whole flock of swallows would follow. She was wrong. A number of women were

appointed as lecturers, and some were even allowed to attend faculty meetings, but it took another 25 years and the revolution of affirmative action to bring a whole flock and make women faculty visible at Harvard.

[See Images 10 and 11: Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin and Helen Maud Camm]

Notes

¹ E. J. Corey with Mary P. Fieser, interview, Jan. of 1982.

² See photograph of women staff at the Harvard College observatory, in introduction.

³ Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin, *An Autobiography and Other Recollections* (New York; Cambridge University Press, 1984), 26, 221-27